

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 001635

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/10/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [IZ](#) [IT](#) [IRAQI](#) [FREEDOM](#)

SUBJECT: IRAQ/ITALY:MORE ITALIAN GOVERNMENT STATEMENTS ON
TROOP DRAWDOWN

REF: A. ROME 902

[1](#)B. ROME 1446

Classified By: Pol M/C Tom Countryman for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Following Berlusconi's recent statements on future troop withdrawals in Iraq (Ref A), both DefMin Martino and FM Fini have made statements in the past week suggesting that Italy will begin a major drawdown after the end of the year. Post views these statements, in the run-up to national elections in spring 2006, as designed for domestic political consumption rather than signs of a wavering Italian commitment in Iraq. However, we will need to continue to press the Italians to ensure that any actual withdrawals are decided upon and announced only after full consultation with coalition partners and only if the security conditions on the ground permit. We should also encourage Italy to balance any withdrawal of military forces with an increased contribution to the NATO Training Mission in Iraq. End summary.

DefMin Martino -- Looking Toward Troop Reductions

[1](#)2. (U) Following PM Berlusconi's March 15 surprise comments on troop withdrawal (Ref A), other key Italian leaders have begun to chime in. Speaking to reporters on May 7, DefMin Antonio Martino looked ahead to "a reduction of the foreign military presence in Iraq" -- a reduction that would obviously include Italian military forces. Martino would not name a date when Italy would begin to withdraw troops, stating that the "re-sizing" would depend on improvements in the Iraqi security situation. But Martino did say that such improvements in security may take place even before ratification of the Iraqi constitution and the subsequent Iraqi parliamentary elections. He noted the "very satisfying" security situation in Nassiriya where Italian troops are deployed and where, thanks to Iraqi and Italian forces, there have been no recent security incidents. Italy's Iraq mission, according to Martino, is a commitment that will last only a limited period of time, as opposed to Italy's long-term commitment to Afghanistan and its entirely open-ended commitment to Kosovo.

FM Fini -- Withdrawal in Early 2006

[1](#)3. (U) At a May 10 press conference, MFA Gianfranco Fini said that the Italian withdrawal will coincide with "the last stop on the road laid out by the UN," that is, after Iraqi parliamentary elections slated for December 2005. After the elections, Italy might stay another month or two at the request of the Iraqi government, making January or February 2006 the possible time for withdrawal. Fini suggested that it would be a phased withdrawal, probably starting no later than January or February 2006, but did not exclude the possibility of a small first step (i.e., 100 carabinieri) in the fall. Like Martino, he spoke of Italian withdrawal as part of a coalition-wide modification and specifically stated that it would not be a unilateral action on the part of Italy. And like Martino, Fini conditioned Italian withdrawal on the security situation, at the same time claiming that increased insurgent attacks on Iraqi government forces show that Iraqis are beginning to take control of the security situation.

[1](#)4. (C) Comment. These comments come as no surprise following Berlusconi's statements on force reduction. We expect to hear more such declarations as the campaign for the 2006 elections (already well under way) gathers steam. Post believes these comments have two purposes: after a humiliating defeat in last month's regional elections, resulting in the resignation and reformation of the Berlusconi government (Ref B), and, according to recent polls, facing possible electoral defeat in next spring's national elections, the Berlusconi government is seeking to assure a public largely opposed to the Italian presence in Iraq that the end is in sight. At the same time, however, playing to the wider international audience, Berlusconi, Martino, and Fini have couched their words carefully with the caveats that any decisions will be based on the conditions on the ground in Iraq, both political and security, and done in consultation with other coalition partners. We need to hold the Italians to their word on this latter point and remind them of Berlusconi's promise to President Bush that he would

consult closely before making any changes. Furthermore, we should push the Italians to balance any troop withdrawals with a compensating increase in support for the NATO Training Mission in Iraq, where the Italians have already staked out a leading role -- for which they should be thanked whenever possible. (Note. NATO and UN-sanctioned operations are much more digestible to the Italian public. End note.)

15. (C) Comment continued. Over the past few weeks the MFA Iraq Task Force Director Luigi Maccotta has, in response to PolOff's probing, repeatedly said that Italy will stay the course. He opined that Berlusconi would appear weak and catering to the opposition if he adopts their position on troop withdrawal, but instead would be viewed by the electorate as a strong leader with an international vision if he sticks to his commitments. Post tends to agree with this assessment, but at the same time recognizes that, realistically, to pacify the majority of voters that oppose the Italian presence in Iraq, he has to give them some hope that the end is in sight. As these pronouncements become more frequent over the next few months, the biggest challenge will be ensuring that they don't become a self-fulfilling prophecy by creating a momentum that leads to public expectations for an automatic full-scale troop withdrawal in January or February 2006. If Berlusconi boxes himself in too much, when push comes to shove, despite his personal commitment to President Bush, reelection will become his top priority. We should stress to GOI officials how important it is that they continue to emphasize publicly that Italy will not stray from its commitment to the Iraqi people.

16. (C) Comment continued. At an April 1 MFA lunch at the MFA for visiting UNSYG Qazi, CHOD Admiral di Paola told DCM that we shouldn't focus on the numbers so much. Italy could withdraw 300 troops tomorrow, he said, and it would have no effect on Italy's ability to carry out its mission in its assigned area, since the decrease in manpower could be compensated by an increase in other abilities, i.e., Predators. We should consider urging GOI officials to stress that, even if Italy reduces the number of soldiers deployed, it will maintain to the extent possible its ability to meet its commitment to its mission in, and to the people and government of, Iraq. End comment.

17. (U) Baghdad Minimize Considered

SEMBLER

NNNN

2005ROME01635 - Classification: CONFIDENTIAL